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Department of State

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Control: 7620

Rec'd: March 10, 1960
10:00 p.m.

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ACTION: CA/MP
INFO:
RM/R FILES File
3/23/60 ORT

FROM: Habana

TO: Secretary of State

NO: 2333, March 10, 6 p.m.

PRIORITY

Embassy suggests following paragraphs for possible inclusion in note protesting and rejecting Castro's insinuation of US responsibility for LA COUBRE explosion:

(1) Although no valid conclusions as to origin of explosion could possibly be reached before completion of an objective, impartial investigation into the matter, and perhaps not even then, Prime Minister Castro had reached and published his conclusions before a full investigation could be initiated.

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Whatever objective finding may ever be reached by expert investigators, a considerable degree of culpability must always attach to the Cuban Government for its orders to have the ship unloaded at the pier, in a congested part of the city and at a time of day when many people would normally be in the general vicinity of the docks. This failure to observe elementary security precautions, which are generally adhered to throughout the world, was responsible for the majority of the casualties and the property damage along the water front, regardless of whether the explosion was due to accident or sabotage. Moreover, many eyewitnesses to the unloading operation have stated that other security precautions were sadly lacking on that unfortunate day. Many persons who had no function to perform in the unloading were permitted on board and swarmed over the ship, some of them smoking. Their presence greatly increased the danger of an explosion by accident at the same time that it created opportunities for a saboteur to act.

The procedure followed in the unloading of the ammunition of the LA COUBRE contrasts with that followed when it was loaded in Belgium. At that time, according to statements published in the press of Habana attributed to the ship's captain, the ship was moved

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E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.3
NLS 81-10
By NARS, Date 11/9/81

951.733-LA COUBRE/3-1060

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ship was moved from the port of Antwerp to the port of Liftenzaes some eight miles distant to load the ammunition, and did not dock but anchored in the stream. It seems unusual that the Cuban authorities would not observe at least equal precautions, particularly when they were aware that the ship had been delayed in its arrival at Habana by rough weather, with the accompanying possibility of shifting and disturbance to the cargo.

The thought is inescapable that the Cuban Prime Minister, in seeking to identify the United States with responsibility for the tragedy, was not only pursuing his consistently unfriendly policy toward the Government of the United States, but was also trying to divert attention from his own government's culpability for not taking proper safety precautions.

(2) One of the principal reasons advanced by the Prime Minister in support of his thesis of US responsibility for the explosion was the fact that GUS has endeavored to prevent Cuba from obtaining the arms it needs for self defense. Specifically, he said: "We have the right to think that those who by diplomatic cynycs* tried to prevent the acquisition of that equipment could also have tried to do it by other procedures." The policy concerning armaments in the Caribbean area which GUS has been following since March 1, 1958 is a matter of public record. Essentially it is designed to prevent an armaments race which would only serve to aggravate existing tensions in that region. To imply from this that the United States is capable of perpetrating acts of sabotage involving lives of scores of innocent persons is a monstrous assumption which US categorically rejects. The GUS has not interfered with the delivery of arms purchased by the GOC in other countries as evidenced by the fact that since January 1, 1959 the GOC has received substantial quantities of war material represented by 20 other known shipments, some of them considerably larger than that carried by the LA COUBRE, from Belgian sources alone. The USG understands that those shipments have included, among other things, approximately 50 million rounds

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million rounds of 7.62 MM ammunition, 17,000 to 27,000 7.62 MM rifles, 26,000 grenades, and large quantities of explosive powder.

End suggested text.

Embassy will forward by priority telegram details of published statements by ship's captain and other data which form basis for statements re loading of ammunition at Liftenzaes.

Information concerning details of armaments received by GOC since January 1, 1959 based largely on reports from American Consulate General Antwerp (see their despatch 180 dated 26 February 1960 and previous). Department may have additional information to further refine or increase figures we mention. As example, despatch 311 from American Embassy Rome indicates purchases of further $3 million worth rockets, launchers, light artillery, etc. from Italian sources, but we do not know whether yet shipped.

Embassy is of opinion inclusion of paragraph on armaments obtained or purchased by GOC since January 1, 1959 will be desirable eye-opener for Cuban people and rest of Latin America. It will paint picture of Castro government's intentions and fears in sharp contrast with Castro's own earlier oft-quoted remark "armas para que". It will also offset impression Castro endeavored leave in his speech of powerful US preventing little Cuba from getting arms it needs for self-defense. Finally, it will show that USG has been aware of (#) larger shipments which it has not molested.

Embassy inquires whether paragraph along following lines could have any place in proposed note:

USG has great concern for welfare its citizens in Cuba. Recent events, and particularly the unfriendly language of Prime Minister Castro toward the USG, have given rise to questions by many US residents of Cuba as to their personal safety. Although they, as well as USG are aware of friendly attitude of Cuban people toward them and their government, their anxiety over official Cuban pronouncements and actions they could inspire is great. A positive statement of guarantees GOC is prepared make under circumstances would be welcomed.

BRADDOCK

VH:LCC/10

(#) Omission; Correction to follow.

(*) As received; Correction to follow.

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